



SURVIVOR PROFILE: HELEN FROMOWITZ WEINGARTEN

Helen grew up in a small Romanian village of Oybochco. She was the seventh of nine children in a religiously observant Jewish family. Her father, Ference, worked as a tailor, and her mother, Bayla Berta, took care of the children. Helen's adventurous and independent spirit took her to the nearby city, Sighet, at the age of sixteen. She had finished school at the age of twelve, which was typical for girls in her village. She studied the sewing trade for a year in the city before returning home with her newly acquired skills to begin working in a weaving factory.

Three years later, when Helen was just twenty years-old, Hungary, an ally of the Nazis, invaded the region of Romania that included her village. Life changed immediately for all Jews. They were required to wear the yellow star and Helen's father was forced to keep his business open on the Jewish Sabbath. While Jews throughout the rest of Europe were being deported and murdered, the Jews of the invaded region of Romania were not taken until three years after the invasion.

In the spring of 1944, the Jews of Helen's village were ordered to leave their homes. Helen and her family moved into the ghetto of Slatina, crowding into the homes of local Jewish families. The ghetto was guarded by armed soldiers. Helen remembers one of the soldiers humiliated her father by forcing him to shave off his beard. Escape from the ghetto was impossible.

While living in the ghetto, Helen and her family had "no specific knowledge" of the suffering and murder to which the millions of other Jews throughout Europe had fallen victim. However, Helen remembers her father telling her family that if anything should happen and they were separated, they should return to their village after the war to find each other again.

Then, in May of 1944, the Jews of the Slatina ghetto, including Helen and her family, were loaded into a train one hundred people in each cattle car and a single pail as a bathroom. The journey lasted five days, during which all Helen had to eat was a small piece of bread she had brought with her from the ghetto. When the train finally stopped and the doors unlocked, the Jews inside the cars were shouted at to leave their suitcases behind with the promise that their personal belongings would be returned later. That promise was never fulfilled and many of them lost much more than material goods that day.

Helen was shocked and bewildered when she saw many people with shaved heads wearing odd clothing. "What did we get into? This is a terrible place," she remembers thinking in reaction. Helen, her family, and the other Jews from the ghetto had arrived at Auschwitz.

Auschwitz was the largest concentration camp as it consisted of three subcamps, one of which was an extermination camp, and 45 satellite camps. Auschwitz was located in southern Poland,

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approximately 30 miles west of Kraków. [Click here to learn more about Auschwitz](#) and [watch an animated map of the camps](#).



Suitcases that belonged to people deported to the Auschwitz camp. This photograph was taken after Soviet forces liberated the camp. Auschwitz, Poland, after January 1945. (National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md.)

The day after their arrival, Helen and the other women were lined up at a long table. SS soldiers, armed with machine guns, watched as the women had their heads shaved. Helen was placed in the same barrack as her four sisters but it was several days before they recognized each other with shaved heads. The greatest devastation of all in those first few days, however, fell upon them when they found out that soon after they had been separated, their parents, their eldest sister, and her children had all been murdered in the gas chambers.

"Existence in Auschwitz was a constant physical and mental nightmare. [I felt] more like an abused animal than a human being," Helen recalls. The women slept in the barracks on bare wooden slats. Twice a day the prisoners lined up for roll call and were forced to stand in line for hours until whoever was missing had been accounted for. They were always starving: breakfast was "weak, cold" coffee, lunch was soup with sand and small pieces of horsemeat, and supper was a single, small piece of bread and a slice of "rancid" cheese or sausage.

The Nazi officers examined the women daily to determine who was fit to work. If anyone was judged as too weak they were sent to the gas chambers instead. Helen's encounter with the notoriously sadistic medical officer of Auschwitz, Dr. Josef Mengele, is a vivid memory. As he examined her, to determine her ability to work, he placed his hands on her to turn her around. "We knew we were going to die. Any hour, any day&" she says. That was not the only time Helen was touched by death at Auschwitz.



Barracks of the women's camp at the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. Poland, 1944. (National Museum of Auschwitz-Birkenau)

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At one point, she narrowly escaped the gas chambers. As she and 500 other women were being marched to the gas chambers, an SS officer announced they were needed for work instead. Helen was so numb with apathy by then that she admits she actually wanted to die at that moment. The deaths of her loved ones had devastated her so. Her sister, Frieda, had been murdered in the gas chambers after falling ill. Her fourth sister, Pearl, was saved from the same fate by Helen and her two sisters Goldie and Esther. Pearl's noticeable skin disease, which was caused by a vitamin deficiency, had marked her for extermination but the sisters hid her during the selection process.

From Auschwitz they were transported next to Nuremberg to work as slave laborers in an airplane parts factory. For three months, they endured the Allied bombing before they were moved to another factory to make metal plates. The bombs followed them and after one particular attack Helen had to be dug out from a cellar.

In April of 1945, American troops liberated Nuremberg. Helen and her sisters were among the survivors.

They lived together in an apartment in Rehau, Bavaria, while they searched for the rest of their family in the war's aftermath. They reunited with their sixteen year-old brother, Irvin, who had also survived. Although they had suffered, they were still young and tried to rediscover "the pleasures of a normal life listening to music, going to dances." During that time Helen met her future husband, Yitzchak (Jack) Weingarten, a Polish-Jewish survivor who had spent four years in the camps. They were married two years after the end of the war and in 1949 they emigrated to Lorraine, Ohio. Their son, Salomon, was a baby of only one year at the time. With the help of Helen's uncle, who already lived in Lorraine, the young family was able to settle before welcoming their second child, Susan.

Helen currently lives in Atlanta near her daughter, three grandchildren, and her great-grandchild.